



GREAT FALLS
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Taking a stab at justice in

More than a quarter century ago, the W.R. Grace company heard complaints that its vermiculite mine near Libby posed serious health risks.

This week a federal grand jury released an indictment accusing the company and its top executives of conspiring for decades to hide those risks.

If convicted, the company faces hundreds of millions in possible fines, and the execs could head to prison.

The company and top brass deny any criminal wrongdoing, and they deserve the opportunity to present their case in court.

We appreciate, however, the hard work of the Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Attorney's office in pushing this case forward. And we suspect that the spotlight of national media didn't hurt.

Six years ago, the Seattle Post Intelligencer first wrote about the Libby mine

and the number of asbestos-related deaths there. More than 200 residents had died, and hundreds more were sick.

The EPA stepped in and the town was fast-tracked onto the Superfund list.

It turns out that vermiculite — used primarily for insulation — contains tremolite asbestos, a known carcinogen.

Not only were the workers exposed, but they carried the toxic dust home on their clothes. Grace donated vermiculite for the high

school running track. And contaminated property was used for homes, parks and businesses.

All the while, according to the indictment, company officials knew the risks and worked to keep them from being made public.

But once the issue hit the headlines, concern spread beyond Libby. In Great Falls, for example, a plant processed the ore in making insulation.

Workers and their families here started connecting their own stories of early

OUR OPINION

asbestos cases

deaths and cancer to the Libby vermiculite.

Homeowners and others, meanwhile, started worrying about the safety of insulation in their attics.

It may be years before the full impacts of the Libby mine are understood.

But if a court determines that Grace knew the risks and conspired to hide them, the company will be hard pressed to get much sympathy.

As for justice? It depends on your perspective.

Les Skramstad, a former

mineworker is sick with asbestosis — and the asbestos fibers he brought home also sickened his wife and children.

If company officials are found guilty, he wants them to pay. But, he acknowledges, "they will never have to pay like we did, because it won't cost them their lives."

Bill Mercer, the U.S. Attorney for Montana, calls the Libby case "a human and environmental tragedy."

No one could disagree.